

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 27, 2004

NOYO RIVER PLAN

File No. 04-016
Project Manager: Michael Bowen

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$50,000 to Trout Unlimited to prepare the Noyo River Plan. The plan will identify, prioritize, and project costs for strategic habitat restoration projects determined to meet the plan goal of improved fishery resource, water quality, and harbor viability.

LOCATION: Noyo River watershed, Mendocino County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) to Trout Unlimited for preparation of the Noyo River Plan (“Plan”), subject to the condition that prior to commencement of work, Trout Unlimited shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, program budget, schedule for completion and the names and qualifications of any contractors or subcontractors to be employed in the preparation of the plan.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 3 (Section 31111) and Chapter 6 (Sections 31251-31270) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code regarding the enhancement of coastal resources.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 25, 2001.
 3. Trout Unlimited is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization would enable Trout Unlimited (TU), a nonprofit organization, to produce a plan for the Noyo River. The Noyo River watershed system historically supported abundant runs of coho salmon and steelhead; Noyo harbor and the surrounding community hosted an equally vibrant commercial fishing industry. The strategy will identify measures to address watershed restoration that can benefit the fisheries, water quality, and the inhabitants of the watershed. The plan will identify strategic habitat restoration projects and will include timelines and cost estimates for those projects. Additionally, the plan will be a useful guide for measuring the success of habitat enhancement efforts over time, and will collect historic and current watershed information for stakeholders including watershed residents, local, state, and federal agencies, city and harbor representatives, and other interested groups.

The watershed enhancement planning process will assess conditions affecting the fisheries and water quality of the Noyo River. The process will include collecting all available information, conducting public workshops involving stakeholders, identifying additional information needs, filling data gaps, and finally producing a draft plan for public review prior to issuing a final report. This effort will be coordinated with local, state, and federal agencies and will track projects that are already underway on the Noyo.

Community and landowner input is essential for a viable plan and for the success of future implementation projects. A framework for broad community involvement will be set up with a feedback loop and review process. This process will be facilitated by TU in conjunction with a citizens advisory committee and with the involvement of the Noyo Watershed Alliance, an association of local landowners and interested groups.

TU is a national coldwater fisheries conservation organization with a long history of successful fisheries and watershed restoration efforts across the United States. Its mission is to conserve, protect and restore North America’s trout and salmon fisheries and their watersheds. TU’s North Coast Coho Project, a restoration partnership forged between TU and private timber companies in 1988, has led to habitat assessment and restoration projects along California’s north coast. So far, assessment projects have studied over 200 miles of roads for their sediment delivery impact on salmonids. Of those projects four restoration plans have been drafted and restoration work has been funded which will prevent 300,000 cubic yards of sediment from entering the creeks and destroying spawning and rearing habitat. TU has conducted an assessment of road related sediment issues in the Upper North Fork Noyo. Restoration prescriptions have been identified and proposals for funding have been submitted to the California Department of Fish and Game. Additionally, two areas in the Noyo basin are targeted for restoration: the Little North Fork of the Noyo River, and the Irmulco Road area.

The mission of NWA is to “improve the Noyo River Watershed’s fish habitat, water quality, and related resources while considering the region’s ecological and socio-economic needs.” Its mem-

bers include representatives from the public, City of Fort Bragg, the Noyo Harbor District, California Department of Forestry at Jackson Demonstration State Forest, Hawthorne Timber Company, and Mendocino Redwood Company. Several entities serve as advisors to the NWA and actively participate in meetings including the California Department of Fish and Game, the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (NCRWQCB), State Coastal Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Mendocino County Resource Conservation District, Mendocino County Water Agency, and the Mendocino County Department of Transportation. Other parties that have participated in the activities of the Alliance include the Irmulco Road Association, the Campaign to Restore Jackson State Forest, California Western Railroad, Mendocino County Railway Society, and a number of interested individuals. Public input and education will be increased by use of website, newsletters, direct mailings, and other communication approaches.

This plan will include prioritized key target restoration areas with construction schedules and cost estimates, and will be based on a voluntary, non-regulatory approach to restoration with cooperation between landowners and the funding and regulatory agencies.

Site Description: The Noyo River is a 72,323-acre watershed located in Mendocino County, entering the Pacific Ocean at Noyo Harbor in the City of Fort Bragg (Exhibit 1). The Noyo River watershed encompasses virtually all of the natural resource and economic issues found in coastal river systems in California. Beginning in rugged forested terrain, the river flows through managed commercial timberland, entering the Pacific Ocean after passing by the town of Fort Bragg, emptying into Noyo Harbor at its mouth. The Noyo River was once a prolific salmonid producing river but impacts due to the various activities within the watershed over the last century, such as logging, fishing, changing ocean conditions, and other factors, have reduced salmonid populations.

The people of Fort Bragg receive the majority of their drinking water supply from the Noyo, with water quantity and quality being major concerns of the community. Noyo Harbor, constructed on the site of a former lagoon-estuary, provides a very important base for marine-based tourism, including sport fishing and whale-watching, as well as commercial fishing and other economic opportunities for this remote coastal city.

Project History: Land management practices in the Noyo watershed, particularly poorly managed and regulated timber harvests and associated road building, have contributed to excessive sedimentation of the Noyo. Sedimentation, in turn, has had a detrimental effect on an historically vibrant sport and commercial fishery, the drinking water supply for the City of Fort Bragg, and an important harbor used by, among others, the Coast Guard. The once robust timber economy is now more rigorously regulated than previously due in large part to sedimentation caused by previous practices. This legacy has contributed to Fort Bragg's severe job losses in both its commercial fishing and with the closing of its last lumber mill in 2003.

Anecdotal information indicates that the Noyo River once had a thriving population of coho and steelhead. Evidence of decline in their populations exists locally in the form of in-migrant fish trap data collected by the Department of Fish and Game since 1963 at its egg-taking station on the South Fork of the Noyo River. The average number of returning coho was 2,819, 2,669, and 2,132 for each of three respective populations. The numbers of returning coho after 1993 represent a decline of the pre-1963 numbers of 93 percent, 60 percent, and 27 percent for each of the

three respective populations (Noyo River Watershed Total Maximum Daily Load for Sediment [TMDL], NCRWQCB, August 1999, page 11).

Associated with the sport and commercial fishing industry, as well as with other important interests, the Noyo Harbor provides significant tourism, recreation, commercial fishing, and other economic activities for the area. At one time, Noyo Harbor was the leading salmon fishing port on the Pacific coast. According to the Institute for Fisheries Resources, the commercial fishing activity in Noyo Harbor has declined 80 percent over the past 20 years (Z. Grader, IFR, 2003, pers. comm.). Additionally, the U.S. Coast Guard uses the Noyo River as a base for search and rescue. To keep the harbor functional it is dredged by the Harbor District and the Army Corps of Engineers to remove accumulated sediments. In 2002, 45,000 cubic yards of sediment were removed from the mooring area through dredging at a cost of over \$200,000. Currently, the dredge spoil disposal site is full, posing a major barrier to future dredging. The harbor is the catchall for both naturally produced and management-related gravel and sediment that is delivered by the Noyo River. A long-term plan to address sediment dredging and disposal issues is required to ensure the viability of the harbor as a recreation and economic entity.

In August 1999 the NCRWQCB completed the Noyo River Watershed TMDL report. This report identifies sediment loading allocations, that, when implemented, are expected to result in the attainment of the applicable water quality standards for sediment, including the protection of beneficial uses, such as a coldwater fishery.

An association of landowners and community interests concerned about regulatory requirements for the improvement of the watershed water quality stemming from the TMDL program, and interested in the protection and enhancement of the Noyo watershed, formed the Noyo Watershed Alliance (NWA) in 2001. NWA solicited funds from the Conservancy for their efforts beginning in 2001. In light of the voluminous data relating to habitat and water quality within the Noyo watershed, staff indicated its preference for a proposal focused more on strategic enhancement planning than on watershed assessment. Trout Unlimited joined the NWA in 2002, and soon offered its services as a grantee and administrator of a proposed enhancement planning process. The NWA endorses this approach.

The proposed Plan would be part of TU's North Coast Coho Project. The North Coast Coho Project, started in 1998, is a cooperative effort among the following:

- Trout Unlimited
- North Coast forestland owners
- California Department of Fish and Game
- Pacific Watershed Associates
- Mendocino County Resource Conservation District
- California Conservation Corps
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

The project's goal is to assess and eliminate road-related as well as other upslope sediment sources and implement needed instream habitat improvements on a basin-wide scale. The long-term objective is achieving coho salmon recovery in this Evolutionary Significant Unit. Today,

Trout Unlimited's North Coast Coho Project spans seven Mendocino County watersheds including the Garcia, Navarro, Big, Noyo, Ten Mile, Pudding Creek, and the South Fork Eel River.

In December 2002 a survey was carried out by the NWA to identify the concerns of residents and property owners of the Noyo River watershed. The main issues of concern are listed next in order of importance to the residents:

- 1: Fish-friendly road maintenance
- 2: River and or creek bank care
- 3: Forestry from a fish's perspective
- 4: Removing non-native invasive species
- 5: Erosion control and prevention
- 6: Revegetation with native plants

The proposed plan would address these concerns through the identification of a suite of proposed strategic restoration projects. It will do so in close coordination with aforementioned interest groups, and in consideration of a variety of ongoing activities, including other assessment and restoration work in the watershed, an examination of dredging options by the harbor, and major local land use issues such as the utilization of the old Georgia Pacific mill site and the disposition of the bankrupt Skunk Railroad. The plan that will be the final product of this proposal will present an integrated presentation of all proposed restoration activities in the watershed, will provide specific documentation and help set priorities for a wide cross-section of resource issues, and will provide a forum for stakeholders to present key information or concerns.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$50,000
Trout Unlimited	<u>5,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$55,000

Funding for the proposed project is expected to come from the Conservancy's FY 02/03 appropriation from the Safe Neighborhood, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Fund (Proposition 12) designated for salmon habitat recovery. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source and with Proposition 12 because it will further the restoration of salmonid habitat in coastal California.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of Division 21, Sections 31251-31270 and Chapter 3, Section 31111 of the Public Resources Code, as follows:

Under § 31111, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to prepare plans and feasibility studies. The proposed authorization, involving the compilation of data for watershed enhancement projects, is the first, necessary step in preparing a credible plan for this region.

Pursuant to § 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources which, because of human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, the proposed project provides funds to Trout Unlimited to conduct data collection and analysis nec-

essary to prepare a plan for coastal fishery resources disturbed by human activities and incompatible land uses.

Section 31251.2 (a) provides that “[i]n order to enhance the natural or scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone, the Conservancy may undertake a project or award a grant . . . to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone. . . .” Consistent with this section, the proposed project will serve to forward enhancement of salmonid habitat in areas that may be located outside the coastal zone. Nonetheless, the proposed authorization as a whole will expedite restoration of coastal zone resources and will benefit the anadromous fish that rely on both the coastal and upstream habitats for their survival. The California Department of Fish and Game is working closely with Trout Unlimited in the Noyo watershed, and strongly supports this grant proposal.

Finally, pursuant to § 31253, “the Conservancy may provide up to the total of the cost of any coastal resource enhancement project.” The amount of the Conservancy contribution is to be determined through an assessment of funding generally available, and other factors. The proposed contribution by the Conservancy was determined based on application of priority criteria and after taking into account other available resources and the matching contributions to the project by other funding sources.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 6 Objective A**, the proposed plan will enable the grantee and other organizations to prepare plans to increase and improve available habitat for aquatic species, notably salmon, by planning for the reduction of sediment sources, removing instream barriers to their free migration, and generally improving water quality and aquatic habitat. By employing the grantee’s expertise, the Conservancy will ensure measurable increases in available habitat and, presumably, measurable increases in anadromous fish populations within and above the project area.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Supporters of this project include the Department of Fish and Game, the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, the Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention, the City of Fort Bragg, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, State Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assemblywoman Patty Berg, the Noyo Harbor Commission, the Mendocino Redwood Company, and others. See Exhibit 2 for letters of support.

4. **Location:** The proposed project will identify enhancement projects within the Noyo River's 72,300-acre watershed located in Mendocino County, entering the Pacific Ocean at Noyo Harbor in the City of Fort Bragg. Site-specific recommendations for habitat recovery throughout the watershed will be made. These recommendations will provide the information needed for strategic habitat improvement efforts within this coastal watershed for anadromous fish and other aquatic resources, and thereby benefit species that rely on both coastal and upstream habitats for their survival.
5. **Need:** Degradation in the water quality of the Noyo River not only affects the fisheries but causes impacts to both water quality and quantity available for drinking water supplies, and affects sediment management and planning in Noyo Harbor. Pursuant to Section 303(d) of the federal Clean Water Act, the Noyo is listed as impaired by excessive sediment loading associated with inappropriate land use practices. A Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for sediment has been calculated for the river and an implementation plan is being prepared by the Regional Water Quality Control Board. Enhancement activities identified in the proposed plan will help diminish sediment loading in this coastal watershed, thereby improving water quality and beneficial uses of the water body.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The public-trust value of California's salmon and steelhead populations is of great interest to all, and is a natural legacy too precious to lose. Moreover, the historic economic contributions from sport and commercial fishing can and must be recovered for the overall economic benefit of the state of California.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Recovery of salmon and steelhead populations listed under the federal or State Endangered Species Acts will only occur if the concerted and strategic improvement of in-stream habitat, and subsequent recolonization of historic range, proceeds expeditiously. Given extremely low levels of coho populations, perhaps as low as 2,000 adults statewide, and recent listing of coho as endangered north of San Francisco Bay, there is an urgent demand for projects such as this.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
11. **Innovation:** This coordinated demonstration of support represents an unusual meeting of the minds for a community often deeply divided over land use practices. Trout Unlimited's demonstrated success in developing and cultivating relationships with landowners, and the worthy restoration projects that ensue, warrant support of this proposal.
12. **Readiness:** The project applicant has demonstrated that it has the agency support and technical expertise necessary to commence and complete the project planning in a timely fashion. The work is expected to be completed within one year.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** Many prior grants demonstrate the Conservancy's strategic focus on and commitment to the enhancement of anadromous fish populations in coastal watersheds. This proposal provides a rationale and cost-effective methodology for accomplishing this goal on the Noyo.
15. **Cooperation:** State and federal agencies, as well as numerous NWA members, have all expressed support for, and a willingness to cooperate with the grantee in accomplishing the project.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project will synthesize baseline data essential to the strategic restoration of coastal watersheds, and the species such as anadromous fish resources that depend upon those watersheds for their survival. The proposed project is therefore consistent with the Coastal Act, specifically with Public Resources Code Section 30231, as follows.

Section 30231 states that “[t]he biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained, and, where feasible, restored through, among other means, minimizing adverse effects of waste water discharges and entrainment, controlling runoff, preventing depletion of groundwater supplies and substantial interference with surface water flow, encouraging waste water reclamation, maintaining natural vegetation buffer areas that protect riparian habitats, and minimizing alteration of natural streams.”

In addition to this general consistency, the Mendocino Local Coastal Program includes specific provisions worth considering for further consistency with the proposed project. Part of the project area is within the Coastal Zone of Mendocino County. The Mendocino County Local Coastal Plan (LCP) recognizes the ecological importance of anadromous fish streams, and considers them environmentally sensitive habitat areas. The LCP identifies the Noyo as among “. . . the most important anadromous fish streams, in terms of miles of use. . . .” (County of Mendocino General Plan: Coastal Element. § 3.1, p. 46). Therefore, preparation of the Plan, designed to enhance the fishery resources of the Noyo, is consistent with the LCP.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Preparation of the project involves only data gathering, planning, and feasibility analyses for possible future actions and is thus statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval.